

DiMartino, Dave. "A Conversation With Jerry Garcia." Yahoo Entertainment, 1 Aug. 2012, <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/bp/conversation-jerry-garcia-185256815.html>.

The following conversation with late Grateful Dead guitarist Garcia took place in the dressing room of the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum prior to his band's performance on February 24, 1992. It was to be part of a large feature on the band for a weekly entertainment publication but, oddly, that publication's editors decided to forgo the feature before the piece was ever written. To commemorate what would have been Garcia's 70th birthday, here Y! Music presents that 1992 conversation in full.

It's been interesting hearing your new song "So Many Roads," particularly because it seems so unusually autobiographical.

Well, it's [longtime lyricist Robert] Hunter writing me, from my point of view, you know what I mean? We've been working together for so long that he knows what I know. The song is full of references to things that have to do with me. It's got a line in there about "Winin' Boy," which is an old Jellyroll Morton tune. Back when I was a folkie, I spent a month working on the guitar arrangement of it. Hunter remembers "Winin' Boy." It goes "Winin' boy, don't deny my name," and this tune also has "Don't deny my name" in it. And it also has the line, "I thought I heard the KC whistle moaning sweet and low," and that's from "KC Moan," an old jug band tune that we used to do in my various jug bands—a tune that I loved from that world of music, black music. So the song is studded with little references that have to do with me and where I've been, what I've been involved with, my own musical background, my roots. Hunter is the only guy that could do that. He can write my point of view better than I can think it, you know what I mean? So that's the kind of relationship we have. And he frequently writes tunes from my point of view that are autobiographical—they're actually biographical, I guess, he's the one writing them—but even so, they express my point of view. And more than that, they express the emotional content of my soul in a certain way; only a long-term and intimate relationship with a guy as brilliant as Hunter coughs up that kind of result. I can sing that song and feel totally comfortable with it. It's full of things that are part of my personal furniture from my own psyche, my own life, my own interests—and the roads thing, of course, is a natural.

I was wondering: Do you find yourself more relaxed when you're out on the road performing?

No. I'm not a relaxed sort of person. I always have stage fright, I'm always nervous before a show. It only lasts until the show starts, but even so—I don't think I would feel right if I weren't that way, you know what I mean? Because fundamentally, it's scary to go out in front of 18,000 people and do anything. And it's all I can do to get myself out there and play. If I had to go out and speak, I would just be paralyzed. I couldn't go out there by myself, even if I had a guitar and played. I don't feel I have the personal energy to address that large of a crowd. There are people I've seen do it. Tracy Chapman does it. She's teeny, she's like a little girl, and her soul touches the entire audience—200,000 people sometimes. It's a special thing that requires a hugeness of being. I don't feel I've got that. I feel more like the guy who's the apex man on the human pyramid. I'm up there, but I'm up there because everyone else is pushing.

Personally, do you feel like you've taken the right course?

Yeah. Whenever you do any kind of work, you always judge yourself harshly. I have never felt that I was very much good at anything [laughs]. It's not like a thing where, well, now I can congratulate myself, pat myself on the back—I feel like I'm in the process of something which is still ongoing. Hopefully, I'm still learning how to play, the Grateful Dead is still learning how to be a band, we're still learning how to make music happen, and we're also learning how to do the thing that we have been called upon to do—which is something that seems important to a lot of people. We take it as seriously as we can, but we realize the need for us to be able to not take it seriously at all at the same time. It's one of those things, you know what I mean? In other words, we didn't really make this happen—it made itself happen, in a way, and we're the guys that were there while it was happening.

Why do you think you're the most successful touring act in rock 'n' roll right now?

I think it's because we aren't showbiz. We don't do an act, we don't have a show, we don't have a formula, we don't have big hits, we don't really sell that many records. What reputation we've developed, and what audience we've got, we've cultivated as a function of them coming to a show and having an experience which is valuable to them—and one they want to keep having in their life at relatively regular intervals. That's the world we're in. It may not be show business, you know what I mean? It may be something else which we don't have a name for, or a word for, or a comfortable concept for, and we don't want to go so far as to call it something like religion, or politics, but it's something that humans want to do, and it's helpful for them in some way.

I was just reading an article on the band in which a Deadhead was seriously—very seriously—pondering what he could possibly do when the band retires. To an outsider, that kind of devotion seems scary. Are you comfortable with the inherently cultish nature of Deadhead-dom?

I feel like what we do is not in any way exceptional. But I feel like there is something that ... People need a situation which is free of context—that's not telling them to do something, or to be some way, or is directing them in any particular way—but is full of content. You know what I mean? So that they can make their own decisions about what it is, and what their relationship is to it, and have it on their own terms, and interpret it as they will. We don't have any dogma, we're not trying to sell anything, we don't have an idea that we're backing up, we're not selling candidates. So our situation is free of requirements. We're not requiring anything of the audience, apart that they be there and they have a good time. And that's what it's about. And if that's the only thing that it's about, and it's no higher than that, that's a very good thing, I think. I figure whatever we're doing, it's probably not something sinister, you know what I mean?

Musically, how has technology changed the way you play?

Well, it's given me some added vocabulary. So far I haven't really gone into my MIDI stuff to the extent of starting to create my own voices, but I could. I've got a Korg M-1, and at home with my Mac I have an M-1 editing program, so I can edit and create my own voices. I may do it eventually, but right now I've got just a few inboard voices that allow me to use what I know about playing the guitar. In other words, they allow me to use my vibratos. My touch translates to other things, so my sense of tone and all these other things ... it's a successful transformation. So all of a sudden if what I'm hearing is a double reed, I can play it like a double reed with a certain amount of expression—it's more organic. I

try to find the voices that are less mechanical and more organic, that allow me to incorporate more of my touch. And there's about four or five of them that I use probably more than I should, but I'm happy with the way they work in the music. And then it's the thing about experience—about where you want to use them, how to fit them in, and things like that. Right now I would love to have a really fluid cello-to-violoncello voice. And also I'd like to have a string quartet voicing that would allow me to separate, say, four strings.

These are things that don't now exist?

They could, but I haven't gotten around to programming them. I'm a slow learner, so I like to incorporate things slowly, gradually over a long period of time. I've just made a major change in the whole structure of my effects and everything, which is something I'm still absorbing. But inside it all is just play the guitar. It's still the guitar—it's still guitar harmonics, keyboard logic that it's still governing.

Things the Dead are now doing like the new Infrared Roses set, and the release of old material from the vaults—how do you look upon it all?

For me, it doesn't hold much interest, and I'll tell you why. For me, the past is clouded with me now listening to me then. I judge myself harshly. I think, "Jesus, that was stupid," or else, "Why couldn't I have been more in tune that night?" It's mostly that. In other words, I see it on the level of what I failed to do, rather than what I did do. So I'm comparing it with something in my head, which is always a problem. And that's not relevant to me or anybody else. I'm glad that things are going out, because I know that there are people that want them. But that music was finished for me after I played it, you know what I mean? It doesn't haunt me.

Do you think you've made many groundbreaking records?

No. I'd say Blues For Allah and Anthem Of The Sun were both very different from other records—the music on them and the sound, their version of music.

Have there been many distinct turning points in the band's long history, in your view?

It's hard—because it's irregular and it doesn't happen at the times you think it might, it really doesn't. Like sometimes you'd think when you get a new member it would change things, but sometimes that doesn't do it. Sometimes it takes longer than that—sometimes it isn't even related to that. We tend to let things go as long as we possibly can, until they get as bad as they possibly can, and then we do something about them. We're always the last to know. We'll get letters from people saying, "You guys are getting kind of repetitious—why don't you learn some new tunes or something?"—before it'll even occur to us. Because we get caught up in the day-to-day thing of it. And since we don't have any agenda, we're not looking at our great goal off in the distance and measuring our progress toward it. We're not doing that. We're freewheeling. We're just going along.

But you've played with Ornette Coleman, you've done so many other unique things—there must be one or two extraordinary musical moments for you.

I don't think I've had enough extraordinary moments. But most of them have been captured, one way or another, on tapes or something. And frequently I'm not the one to judge whether they're extraordinary or not. Times that are fun for me are sometimes really boring for other people. And times that are difficult, or when I don't feel I did a very good job, sometimes turn out to be much better than I thought they were when I hear them later.

Playing keyboards in the Grateful Dead doesn't appear to be a healthy proposition. Do you ever talk about it?

Oh sure, we talk about it. It's like the death chair. [laughs] You have to be [good-humored about it]. I don't know whether it's us, or whether it's the position or what, but I don't think ... it's something I really don't know. I know that each person who's been in our band and subsequently died, who was a keyboard player, had problems of their own, quite apart from the Grateful Dead. And that being in the Grateful Dead, like everything else, tends to amplify stuff. It makes bad things worse and good things better. It's like a battery—you plug anything into it, and that thing gets louder, whether it's a good thing or a bad thing.

Tell me about the Bill Graham Memorial Concert.

It was tough. For me, what was really tough was Bill's funeral, or wake, or whatever. That was tough. I didn't want Bill to die. I'm pissed off about his being dead. I always will be, it ain't fair. And I'm frustrated in a peculiar way. I'm like everybody else, I thought Bill was indestructible; it never occurred to me that he might die—it just never occurred to me. I know that this is going to go on forever, this is going to go on for the rest of my life—I'm going to be thinking, Jesus. We were kind of saving Bill up, you know what I mean? There are a couple of things that I'm always going to be glad about. I'm glad we took him to Egypt with us. It wasn't his show; he didn't have to do it. He came just to party, just to have a good time, just to come. And he was game enough to do it. And I'm glad he did it, because it was one of the greatest times any of us ever had. Our project with Bill was to make Bill a human being. When we first met him, he was so wired, and so uptight, and on such a New York trip, that it was hard to be around him even for a minute. He was so nervous, he had such frantic energy. And for us, it was always, "Come on, Bill," you know? And he played all the way—he got high with us, he went off and did a lot of things. I'm proud of the guy that he became, and I'm proud of what he did with his life, and I'm proud of him for getting into the movies at the end. That was really rewarding for him. And I think he had a wonderful life.

And I also think, "Okay, Bill, you'll always be that guy, you're a man at the peak of your power—still a vigorous 60-year old guy, not showing any signs of decay, not decrepit at all." Bill was getting to the point where he was old enough where he was going to be starting to lose it a little, and it would've drove him crazy, he would've hated it more than anything else. The idea that his son could beat him at racquetball—he was such a competitor. He would've had a massive heart attack. So at least he went out at peak power. And I'm pretty sure it was probably fast, so he didn't experience any horrible horror, any pain probably, and I don't see how you can improve on that. And as far as the Bill in our minds forever—our Bill will never be an old guy, we'll never see him lose it. He'll always be that vigorous guy, even when we get old and f**ked up. If you had to pick your way to go, Bill didn't pick a bad way. Bill went out at a good moment in his life.

Your contemporaries have either died, broken up, or simply don't even have record deals anymore. Why have the Dead done so well in contrast?

I think it's because we never thought we were that good to begin with. And we always were concerned with the growth, and with our little community. And we didn't have an axe to grind, we didn't want to be famous, particularly, we liked what we were doing. We always loved what we were doing, and we've continued to do it for love. And there's something about the Grateful Dead that is just not like anything else. The people in it have a lot to do with it. They're not like other people (laughs). They're not like other musicians. And things are always opening in front of us—there are things for us to conquer, things for us to do to get better at. We've always wanted to sound as good as we possibly could, we've always wanted for our audience to have an amazing experience as much as possible. And that's been our thrust. Not personal aggrandizement, not scoring big in the music business. Our friends and other people in the music business who were certainly as talented as we are—probably most of them—it's the thing of somewhere along the line, faith failed them. Or else they got involved in the music thing for some other reason—scoring chicks, getting bucks, something less than reaching all the way. I don't know that that means anything, but maybe it has something to do with it, I don't know.

How vigorously are you pursuing your career in visual art?

I've been doing it all my life. The first thing anybody ever noticed about me was that I was talented at art. I was brought up thinking of myself as a graphic artist, I went to art school, and I was always the kid that could draw. That's what I thought I was going to do, too. But then when I got my first little electric guitar, I found myself spending virtually all my time donking around on it. Music kind of seduced me. I wasn't really planning on becoming a musician, not even after I became one. I wasn't really thinking about it. I just found myself playing all the time. I was so fascinated by the sound that I heard on records, I was thinking, I've got to make that sound, I've got to be able to make that sound. That's what happened to me with 5-string banjo, too. I fell in love with it. I heard it, and I thought, "I'm not going to be happy in this world until I can make that sound."

Does doing visual art tickle the same portion of your brain that playing music does?

No, it's different. I do art in fits and starts. I have spasms of maybe three or four months of intense art activity, where every night I sit up for four or five hours and fire away. And then it goes away. It might go away for a year or six months, and I don't think about it. I don't start with ideas, I just start. I draw the way I play: Something starts coming out of it and I just go with it. Every once in a while I have an idea, and then I work on the idea, or every once in a while I find myself in a thematic thing. I'll draw lots of parrots or lots of fish or something.

Your merchandising company is now raking in the bucks, but you couldn't make the Dead's own record label work in the '70s. What's different now?

We didn't have quite the reputation then, and we didn't have quite a big enough audience to be able to support it. And we were also trying to be a conventional record company. We were trying to distribute along conventional lines, and in those days we went with the independent distributors—which is like really four or five distributors in various localities. And the way they work, it's all paper flow. When you make your first shipment of records to go into the record store, you don't get any money for those. You get your money later.

But only if you've got something else good to offer them...

Right—if you've got something good to offer them. And since we didn't have a real record company, and since we didn't have any other high-powered acts or anything, if they wanted to burn us, no problem. Now, we don't distribute the same way. And also, that whole distribution thing has all gone to s**t, it's a completely different deal now. Now it's more like we can make the kind of deals we want to. And also, we have an audience which is our audience, so we don't really care what's happening in the music business at large. It's too bad that the music business isn't more concerned about music, more attentive to the music that keep them alive, the people who buy records and so forth. It's still the way it always was—real greedy.

You're still signed to Arista?

We owe Arista at least one more studio record, maybe two. I think just one.

What happens after that?

We're back on our own again, and can do whatever we want.

Do you think you'll do it on your own again?

We may. I don't know that we'll do it on the same terms. There's something to be said for working for a record company when you're going for platinum. We don't have the facilities to be able to manufacture and ship large—we can't do it. We may not need to do it, who knows? We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Soon as we're finished, we can talk about it.

You recently were critically ill, which spooked a lot of people. Did that experience change you much?

I don't think I changed a whole lot as a person, but a lot of things changed. I've never been quite the same since then—it did f**k me up. I have some permanent weirdness. This foot (points downward) is about 20 percent desensitized. This leg and this foot—I can still feel it and stuff, but I can't run without looking at it, you know what I mean? It's weird, it's like when your foot falls asleep. But it won't go away. Mentally, I have to grope. I used to be able to access a huge vocabulary, I could speak really precisely about things. Now sometimes I know what it is I want to say, but I've lost the index, you know? You don't notice it, but I do. It's a random-access thing, and I get a little mushy every once in a while. And then if I remember the exact word, maybe the next day I'll forget it again and won't be able to find it. But it's quirky. Sometimes everything is fine, other times it's a little mushy. It's nothing serious, but it is something I notice, you know?